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ABSTRACT

Interviews were conducted with contact persons in each of six Western states to assist in determining how the services and products of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Title I Evaluation Technical Assistance Centers (TAC) could be used most effectively to help State and local education agencies improve the use and usefulness of evaluations. Respondents were asked to identify the biggest obstacle to the use of evaluation data and how TAC could help to improve evaluation use. Data quality was the most frequently cited obstacle to effective use of evaluations. Other obstacles cited reference data interpretation, quality of objectives, timing of the evaluation-report cycle, limitations of the Title I Evaluation and Reporting System, negative or inappropriate uses of data, confounding results across programs, focusing the evaluation reports, and training at the wrong level. More direct training on data interpretation and use and on implementation evaluation, assistance with local studies, and a refocusing of evaluation on the building level were seen as vehicles for TAC to provide help for evaluation improvement. (Author/MK)

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LOCAL EVALUATION USE: CAN THE TAC HELP?

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LOCAL EVALUATION USE: CAN THE TAC HELP?

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THE PROBLEM:

How can the services/products of the Title I Evaluation Technical Assistance Centers be used most effectively to help SEAs and LEAs to improve the use and usefulness of evaluations at their respective levels.

BACKGROUND:

TAC Goals

1. To assist LEAs and SEAs in meeting the evaluation requirements of Title I legislation by implementing the Title I Evaluation and Reporting System (TIERS).

2. To help LEAs and SEAs improve their Title I programs through the application of effective evaluation practices.

TAC Services

(See Sample List.)

APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM:

- Informal data collection--observations, discussions, field notes, logs.

- Formal data collection--evaluation questionnaires, surveys, interviews.

Informal data is a continuous part of the process of providing service.

Adaptations/innovations are based on informal data or experience.

More formal data collection includes:

- "TAC EFFECTS STUDY" (1978). Large scale-comprehensive survey of clientele to assess needs for service. Data used for assisting TAC in deciding what to emphasize; how to allocate resources in terms of time/effort to gain greatest effect.

- LOCAL USE INTERVIEW STUDY (1980-81). More limited "focused" study consists of interviews with each state contact person in 14 states. Territories not included due to: (1) logistics, and (2) special needs. Study not complete.

TAC LOCAL EVALUATION USE INTERVIEW STUDY

QUESTIONS:

1. What, in your view, is the biggest obstacle to effective use of evaluation data at the SEA level and the LEA level?

2. How can TAC help your SEA to improve uses of evaluation

   - at the SEA level?
   - at the LEA level?

3. Does improving the uses of evaluation require greater TAC involvement with LEAs? (Asked only in states where direct contact between TAC and LEA is permitted.)

RESPONSES

State No. 1

1. Biggest Obstacle:

   a) Interpreting results

      - People don't know what the data means, especially NCEs.

      - Achievement test data has limited value, doesn't give full picture of program, therefore can't have much value in program improvement decisions.

   b) Writing good objectives, relating outcomes to objectives. How can information relative to differences be used in making program improvement decisions? Closer link needed between data and program planning. Objectives should provide the link.

2. How Can TAC Help:

   Not really sure, but program implementation-evaluation may help. Some examples:

   - Inservice on program implementation evaluation.

   - Inservice on materials implementation evaluation.

   Problem: Many LEAs are not motivated to use evaluation in any way other than a compliance fashion.

3. LEA Involvement

   (Not asked in this state because of state policy.)

State No. 2

1. Biggest Obstacle:

   - Data quality. Data are only useful to the extent that data quality is high. Don't want LEAs to over-interpret gains when quality is suspect.

   - SEA has emphasized this. Data quality is improving each year. As it improves, it becomes more useful.

2. How Can TAC Help:

- Help find an alternate solution to regression effect error problem, something other than separation of pretest and selection.

- New evaluation regulations have provided SEAs-LEAs motivation to use results. An example is the sustained effects requirement. TAC can help by helping LEAs to learn how to ask themselves the question "What do I really want to know from these data and how can I find the answer?"

- Instruction on data use.

3. LEA Involvement

- LEAs who want more TAC service are those with problems (gains are too low). Those satisfied with their gains don't want as much help. They are not as concerned about data use. There are two kinds of interest in data use:

  1. Statistically oriented person is interested in problems with the data.

  2. Instructionally oriented person is interested in problems indicated by the data.

  This implies need for different kinds of technical assistance.

State No. 3

1. Biggest obstacle:

   Depends on definition of "use."

   a. One definition implies that evaluation results can point to problems with Title I projects at individual grades within a school.

      Use, then is contingent on sufficient data at each grade. Rough generalizations can then be made on effectiveness and related to project characteristics.

      Problems that inhibit use under this definition:

      - Improper implementation of evaluation models resulting in invalid data, can lead to invalid decisions or recognition that data are invalid may lead to non-use.

b. Another definition of "use."

Being able to provide information that goes into a dependent variable in a quasi-experimental study of different program characteristics.

Problem-constraints to doing experimental studies in the field, e.g., control of variables, random assignment, etc.

2. How Can TAC Help:

a. TAC can help make sure models are properly implemented, through LEA-TAC communication. TAC can help LEAs be more aware of dangers of interpretations from invalid data.

b. TAC can help LEAs identify designs that are valid ways of answering locally generated questions. This includes specifying additional data beyond TIERS; specifying ways of defining variables of interest that can be studied; helping with design of analyses of data; helping to identify constraints that would lead to invalid interpretations.

3. LEA Involvement:

Depends on LEA and evaluation use definition as indicated.

State No. 4

1. Biggest Obstacle:

Some districts are using negative results (poor gains) to shake up their programs.

Positive results aren't being used as much (as they could/should be.)

2. How Can TAC Help:

- Workshops on interpretations of results.
- Teaching LEAs to key their decisions to certain parts of reports, (presumably, those parts which are most pertinent to the decision being made.)

3. LEA Involvement

(Not asked due to logistic and policy reasons.)

State No. 5

1. Biggest Obstacle:

   - Unreliability of data. Getting reliable data requires doing something we don't know how to do.
   - Reporting cycle-timing is off for effective state level use of data.
   - Confounding of results across programs. A child may be "impacted" by multiple programs with each program claiming credit for positive results.
   - Wrong information is collected for LEA use.
   - It never occurs to LEA staff that what they are doing might not be effective. They focus on individual outcomes more than group.

2. How Can TAC Help:

   - Little can be done to influence use of TIERS data. TIERS is not organized for use at LEA level.
   - Longitudinal data might help.
   - TAC has influenced better knowledge and use of tests and measurement.

State No. 6

1. Biggest Obstacle:

   - Emphasis on models and pre and post-testing detracts from other kinds of data collection and use. To many, LEAs pre-post testing <u>is</u> evaluation.
   - Testing-planning cycle. Posttest data come in <u>after</u> the next year's plan is in. This could be alleviated by mid-year testing but norm dates are incompatible.
   - Teachers look at year to year gain. They are not used to taking a longitudinal view. Also, practical constraints such as <u>student mobility</u> affect longitudinal view.
   - Level at which evaluation has focused, e.g., administrator is not appropriate. There should be more focus on the classroom teacher level. The lack of awareness of <u>potential</u> benefits of evaluation begins with the classroom teacher.

2. How Can TAC Help:

- Provide more training on sustained and implementation evaluation.
- Focus more on building level personnel; teachers and principals.

3. LEA Involvment.

(Not asked.)

SUMMARY

Interviews were conducted with the TAC contact person in each of six western states to obtain their views on two major questions pertaining to the use of evaluation data.

1) What is the biggest obstacle to the use of evaluation data at the SEA and the LEA levels?

2) How can the TAC help to improve the use of evaluation?

Data quality was the most frequently cited obstacle to effective use of evaluation data, with three of the respondents referring to this issue in some form. Other responses included: data interpretation, quality of objectives, timing of the evaluation-reporting cycle, limitations of TIERS, negative or inappropriate use of data, confounding of results across programs, focusing the evaluation reports and training at the wrong level.

As can be seen, the responses to this question varied widely, indicating a variety of problems rather than any clearly defined core of common concerns. To some extent this reflects the differences in conditions within states, and to some extent it reflects differences in interests, skills and philosophies of the interviewees. For example, in one state where data quality is of major importance, a considerable effort has been mounted by the state to improve the quality of data through centralized data collection and use of a computer to reduce errors in computation. This state was one of the first to implement the TIERS computer program and has kept abreast of all changes and improvements in the use of computers for TIERS analysis.

Alternative definitions of evaluation use were seen as important in a state wherein the contact person was a professional evaluator. This

person's interest in pursuing research questions at the local level was also reflected in the obstacles cited.

In general, the obstacles to evaluation use were somewhat idiosyncratic by state, however.

On the question of how TAC might help improve evaluation use at the LEA and SEA level, responses were less varied. More direct training on data interpretion and use and on implementation evaluation were seen as helpful. Assistance with local studies and a refocusing of evaluation on the building level were also seen as helpful.

These results are admittedly sketchy and are based on interviews with only six state contacts. During the next two to three months, similar interviews will be conducted with eight more states. The results of all fourteen interviews will be used to analyze TAC services and goals and if implications for change appear, new service priorities will be established. It would be premature to base any conclusions on these early results but some observations and possible implications may be worth a few comments.

Observations and Possible Implications

1. It may be as important to note certain omissions from the responses as it is to note the responses themselves. For example, in an attempt to become more cost efficient and to create a legacy of instructional and reference materials which will outlast the TACs themselves, the Title-I TACs nationally are engaged in a coordinated effort to produce high quality instructional materials aimed at specific evaluation problems. While this effort has been underway for more than a year, none of the state contact persons mentioned instructional materials either in their problem or their solution statements.

2. It appears that there is still some frustration with perceived deficiencies in the TIERS system and perhaps with the inherent usefulness of aggregated achievement data to program planners and implementers.

3. TAC services seem to be perceived as useful in general and as having at least potential value in solving some of the problems related to evaluation use.